

Chapter one

In the beginning There was What? What? was What There was. What was There? What was. There was. That is What? was Here also and There with That. How? was the Enemy of What? What? Didn't care about How? How? had to do What? What? Said. And Why? came at the end. Why? was the end of all, but not What? Why? this was only What? knew. At the end, When Why? Came, How? was neither Here nor There.

1:1:1

Like all decent tragedies, it started with a joke. We were talking late one night, Nathaniel, Sally, Martha, Brian and me. Wraith-like hammocks of dope smoke were slung in the air and Radiohead's *OK Computer* was on random play, volume low, muttering and jarring now and then. This must have been, I want to say, 1997. The normal booze had run out and we were drinking from beautifully shaped bottles of prune liqueur from Portugal and chocolate wine from Orange in France.

We were in Brian Scallion's wilted and mouldy caravan in the dark fastness of Sefton Park in Liverpool.

Summer. 1997. Liverpool. Caravan.

Sally Wreath slumped in a deck chair; Nathaniel Holborn lay stretched out on a camp bed, ankle on raised knee, foot a-wagging to the not loud music; Brian stood at the fold down kitchenette counter making white bread sandwiches and Martha McClara was threading a necklace with different coloured cork rings.

'I once thought my father was God,' said Nathaniel.

'How's that?' Sally said.

'We went to mass every Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday, and every holiday.'

'Roman Catholic?' Brian asked.

'Check,' said Nathaniel. 'And I was an altar boy. And held a candle. And peeled candle wax from my fingers. One day I asked the priest about whether my dad and God were the same person. He thought I meant because of all the God the father, our father who art in heaven stuff, and all that, which I suppose could have been some of it, but I said, no, it's because at the end of the mass you say Thanks Peter God. And you see my dad's name was Peter. Is Peter. Plus dad never came to mass and for some odd reason that made it more likely that he was God. I always imagined God wouldn't have to come to church. I mean he'd let himself off. I couldn't imagine anyone going to

church who could get out of it. Of course, the priest, Father Kieran it was, he had himself a good old Irish laugh and explained that he didn't say Thanks Peter God, but Thanks Be to God, which struck me as twice as daft.'

'So nothing to do with good old Peter,' Sally said, who had met Nathaniel's dad, an unremarkable quiet man, an accountant in fact, now retired, who always seemed to be looking for something. 'No.'

Brian cut the sandwiches—there was nothing but iceberg lettuce in them—into neat triangles and handed the plate to Martha who put down her necklace and took one, biting into a corner, a nice semicircle with half moon indentations.

'The priest used that story for three different sermons,' Nathaniel said. 'One of them a funeral.' 'To show the imagination and simplicity of a small child,' said Sally, who often endeavoured to complete Nathaniel's thoughts.

'How a child has a real relationship with God, one that we, as sophisticated adults, struggle to attain,' said Martha, not to be outdone.

'Right,' said Brian.

We were all eating the sandwiches now and we all confessed, having been sceptics when Brian suggested sandwiches with just lettuce—no tomatoes, cucumber, cheese or ham, just lettuce—that the simplicity was beguiling.

'I didn't even know lettuce had a taste,' said Nathaniel.

'Poverty opens up opportunities,' Brian said. 'Austerity provides clarity.' Brian was a man who was struggling with his alcoholism by drinking himself into a definite unambiguous state of alcoholism the better to later renounce it unambiguously. He currently believed himself to be only a hard drinker and would be clear about his alcoholism when he was finishing off bottles of vodka before lunch—a feat he'd only managed twice and which had almost killed him. He would get there though. In 2006. Brian had no physical appearance as such. He was a blur. A large blur but indistinct nonetheless. A large liquidy blur. He left unnecessarily long gaps in the middle of sentences. 'Even as it closes doors.'

'There was something strange about this though,' Nathaniel said. Sally lit him a cigarette and passed it to him. He took it and smoked. Benson and Hedges. 'When I was a child, I remember thinking: fair enough. That explains it. But then with another side of my mind, I remember thinking perhaps not.'

'Perhaps your father is God?' Martha said, knotting the string to finish the necklace. She handed it to Brian who put it on and then took a prodigious swig out of a bottle of peach Schnapps.

‘Exactly,’ said Nathaniel. ‘Why not? Why would that be any more ridiculous than the explanation that denied it?’

‘I remember thinking Robert Powell was God,’ Sally said, sipping more gingerly at her sangria. ‘Or at least the son of God.’

‘It effected me a great deal that television programme,’ Brian said, clearing away the loaf of bread sweeping the crumbs off the counter and into the pedal bin. ‘I remember the music. Gave me toothache.’

‘The point was that for a while there I really did think he was God.’

‘Peter?’ said Sally with an explosive laugh that was—even she felt—a little too much.

‘I always liked reincarnation,’ said Martha. ‘I like the technology.’

‘Isn’t that what Scientologists call their thingy?’ asked Sally.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Brian.

‘I mean the furniture, you know,’ said Martha. ‘You don’t need to add anything. You have life and death and no other place you have to go.’

‘It gets more complicated,’ Sally said. ‘I did a yoga course and well, it gets more complicated.’

‘I’m sure it does but still. There’s a simplicity,’ Martha said. ‘No heaven, no hell. Just death and rebirth.’

‘Well, what if you could choose?’ Nathaniel asked. ‘What if you could just make up your own religion? I mean it was just made up anyway. At some point in all major religions and minor ones. Someone sat down and started spouting.’

That was it. That was the beginning. No one really thought about it that seriously. We were joking, kidding around. Then someone started banging on the side of the caravan and Brian pulled out his air rifle and ran outside. The kids were already hiding in the darkness but Brian ran blindly out into the warm night hooting and firing at any movement. Soon the night air was filled with the sound of angry shouting and stupid laughter.

Some weeks must have gone by. It was the end of the summer and we were all surprised by the chill in the air one evening the same way we had been surprised in May by the light in the sky that held longer and longer without apparent explanation.

Brian Scallion had disappeared. He'd left his caravan and the council packed all his stuff into a shed and put a padlock on the door which was like sending a gold embossed invitation to theft. Two nights later it was all gone, his fishing gear, his smutty magazines, his Oxfam overcoats and his ashtray collection, all gone and replaced by a long twirly Cumberland sausage of turd.

Assuming Brian had decided to drive his alcoholism at full pelt into vagrancy and absolute poverty, we facetiously imagined him sleeping in hedgerows, dressed in a suit entirely made of newspapers, living off gooseberries and stolen pints bottles of milk.

One afternoon, the rain was coming down as unexpected and yet as inevitable as heartbreak and grief, and we were sitting in a cafe close to the university. Marcus Doogle and Sally were talking about Nathaniel and what a tosser he was and I was nodding vigorously, when he walked past the window. He was listening to his headphones and so didn't respond or turn when we banged on the glass. Sally ran up behind him and grabbed his elbow. He turned round quickly, as if ready to fend off an attack, ready to wallop Sally with his cloth bag of books.

He had a Diablo in there which would have raised a welt.

He came in and nodded to Marcus, looking sheepish. Marcus was smoking a pipe, a fact he had apologised for already.

'It began as an affectation, but then I got to really like the taste.' Marcus had a scraggly beard and a habit of sniffing the air whenever he set foot outside as if sampling a bouquet. He was a cross between Gil Scott Heron and James Herriot.

'Nathaniel,' he said, by way of greeting.

Nathaniel took a slice of toast from Sally's plate folded it neatly in two and wedged it into his mouth in its entirety, his cheeks bulging like Dizzie Gillespie mid-blow.

'What's this about you beginning a religion?' Marcus asked.

Nathaniel held a finger up as he chewed industriously and then swallowed before the job was half done. 'Simple enough Marcus. The Church of Wishful Thinking.'

'What do you believe in?'

'What do you want?'

'I don't get it,' Marcus said.

'I don't get it,' Nathaniel repeated in an affected and poncy voice. Despite his much trumpeted intelligence, Nathaniel was not above employing any trick learnt from the playground to win his arguments. Comparisons with Nazis, invented statistics, anecdotes in which young children die as a

direct result of what his opponent was advocating and pleas for his opponent not to start crying were all much of a muchness for Nathaniel.

Marcus bowed his head, temporarily beaten.

Sally took pity on him.

‘In the year 325 Anno Domini, a council of Bishops met in Nicaea and decided on a creed of correct belief. The whole point was to counter arguments from some Christians that thought Christ was the son of God but having been created by God there was a time when he was not. Do you understand?’

‘No.’

‘So they sat down and they wrote out what they believed,’ Nathaniel said. ‘Without any particular communication from God. This wasn’t Moses or something. And they voted on it.’

‘Spectacular,’ said Marcus.

‘So why can’t we do the same? Why can’t we just make up a whole bunch of shit, rules, rituals etc, agree to it all and then that will be our church? You know, for friends?’

‘What about the role of revelation? Divine inspiration? Heartfelt belief? Faith?’

‘I’ll tell you someone else who talked a lot about revelation, divine inspiration, and heartfelt belief,’ Nathaniel shouted. ‘Adolf Hitler, Marcus. Adolf fucking Hitler!’

The woman with the windscreen-sized TV glasses, red hands and blue apron told them to lower their voices or get out. They bowed their heads submissively. That morning all had been alarmed and secretly or not so secretly pleased by the news that Diana, Princess of Wales, had been killed in a car crash in Paris. A rather banal soap opera had taken an abrupt and original twist. The sudden importance of the loudly banal.

They moved away from religion and discussed the news of the day quietly under the baleful stair of the woman at the counter.

1:1:3

Nathanial stopped going to lectures and tutorials soon after that and began to immerse himself in a series of exercise books in which he was scribbling his ideas for his religion. It turned out that forming a religion was very similar to forming a band in that a disproportionate amount of time and effort went into the thinking up a good name. Every time we met, he gave a different name. *The Church of Wishful Thinking* was initially rejected on the grounds that it was too nakedly satirical. *The Blatherers* likewise. *SWMU* also, although this was my favourite. Nathanial walked alongside the river, looking at the dirty brown water, or he took the train to Formby beach and walked along the shore, his canvas bag slapping at his buttocks, stuffed with bean bags carried by force of habit but rarely flung up in the air in parabolas of increasing complexity and wonder. He would stare stubbornly at the sand, the rippling track left by the retreating waves; interrogate the whistling wind that stung his ears; glare up at the passing clouds. Somewhere it had to be. The Meaning of Life no less.

But where?

He had become convinced that it was available. He reasoned that the imagination was the key. 'That is the key,' he yelled at the top of his lungs, scaring everybody in the ticket queue to *The Mikado* (Welsh National Opera, Empire Theatre, spirited performance of the Gilbert and Sullivan classic with—alas—lackadaisical staging.)

He would bang tables in Portuguese restaurants and argue until his face was hot and red and he made no sense any more. Even when he started, before his face was red and hot, he didn't make that much sense.

He had lost all interest in the juggling society which had, until then, been a source of social success and endless opportunities for narcissism. And it had been a genuine talent. He had the knack. And there was something surprising in that too. A man of his build. Sturdy, large, strong in the way men who can break down doors are strong. And yet when he threw skittles in the air, flaming torches, following their parabolas with fluttering smoke trailing behind, bean bags, a Diablo, blunt bladed machete like knives, tennis balls, arcing, criss-crossing, always moving, hands a blur, there was something there, like grace.

It is fair to say we worried a little about Nathanial and openly discussed possible ways we could intervene, but we would shy away from actually confronting him. He was taller than all of us, a physically intimidating presence. Gangly with ape like arms and sooty black Dickensian hair that poked out of his shirt front and the cuffs of his shirt. He filled the room, and he scraped his face

every morning with cheap throwaway razors only to have his stubble launch itself through his pores by lunch time. He had once held a first year sociology student over a railway bridge, dangling him and shaking him until he recanted his Marxism. He said that he had only been joking and offered as part of his defence the fact that he too was a Marxist and moreover a member of the much feared *Revolutionary Communist Party*, who spoiled parties on a regular basis: a fact that was only technically true.

In time the University authorities began to send Nathaniel nasty letters, cold and full of 'It has come to our attention's and 'As you are fully aware' s; and other such official snideness.

He spent many pointless hours crafting carefully nuanced replies, which almost always end in black capitals and profanity.

We all lived together in a large terrace house in Waverly Street near Lark Lane, with a cement mixer rusted shut in the front garden and a small sweets factory on the end of the street. We would occasionally find industrial-sized bags full of pear drops and jelly babies discarded perhaps by a thief or a careless worker. We took them home and filled jars with them. Nathaniel scored kop-kops and aniseed balls from a worker on a street corner. He always had little ¼ paper bags bunched up in his pockets and would pop in a barley sugar and commence loud sucking and then cracking noises. It was a habit he had picked up off Martha who wouldn't deign to eat our factory spoilt ware but had her own supplier in a small sweet shop and tobacconist in School Lane in the city.

Beside me and Nathaniel, Sally lived with us, and Damian Plantagenet (short man with a muzzle-like mouth that jutted out) had a small room in the annexe and Ashley Pennac, a gentle voiced poet, lived in the upstairs room. Walter Strike draped a huge Irish flag in the bedroom opposite and bitterly condemned the Anglo-Irish agreement and the treatment of prisoners in the Maze prison, which was the political equivalent of still being excited by the prospect of seeing *Pink Floyd* at the Wembley Arena, something which occasionally he was also prone to be. Nathaniel lived in the downstairs room, the heater of which, we were to find out later, was leaking lethal doses of carbon monoxide and, if it hadn't been for his persistent insomnia and tendency to sleep with Sally whenever she wasn't sleeping with Marcus, would have most likely killed him.

'Such are the vagaries of life,' he said, upon hearing a year later that the house on Waverly had been condemned and the heater in his room cited as a particularly fatal danger in what was, even so, a long list of dangers.

We took turns cooking.

Ashley Pennac was the best cook and would take especial care over his meals, producing perfect lasagnes and spicy stir-fry, fresh vegetable curries and finely tuned risotto. He always made a

pudding, usually some sort of fruit pie with custard, or ice cream which he made from crushed rose petals, and selected wines with care, accompanying each dish with a bottle that went just so. The end of each meal was celebrated with the ritual igniting of expensive rich-uncle-smelling cigars. Sally's meals were the worst. She used a soya substitute for meat which needed to be soaked for hours and still tasted like uncooked tire rubber. Her lentil stew brought on stomach cramps so swiftly that a plate was rarely finished before the diner had to resort to the bathroom. Fortunately we had two bathrooms and a long thin garden overgrown with brambles and nettles, which could be used in an emergency. The rest of us produced Mexican bean burgers, pot noodles, potatoes, beans and sausages, frozen foods and pasta with sauces from jars, indifferently well and failing that large bags of chips, supplemented with polystyrene cups of curry and peas.

It was Ashley's turn to cook and he had skipped his media studies lecture in order to go shopping at the vegetable and fish markets in Kensington. He served fresh oyster with a dry slightly fizzy wine, and toasted wedges of fresh bread—Damian had never eaten oysters before and took some convincing—followed by a small cup sized portions of shell fish risotto, followed by grilled salmon, a sorbet, a bottle of prosecco each, a rhubarb tart with custard and Montecristos with coffee. We chatted amicably, under the benevolent influence of Ashley's wonderful food.

'Food is important,' Nathaniel said.

We all agreed.

'I think we need to get started,' said Nathaniel. 'I've been trying to do this on my own but I'm going to need your help.'

Sally nodded. I was always under the impression that Nathaniel rehearsed whatever he had to say for her sole benefit prior to launching it publically. She probably gave him notes. 'What do I need to make a religion? What questions should we ask and what should we answer?'

Walter Strike was catholic, politically, and so shook his head in mute disapproval. He carefully examined his fingernails. Walter was a short man with a happy irresistible smile. For some so critical of the world around him, he seemed remarkably content.

Damian Plantagenet broke a fresh roll and nibbled at it.

'God or Gods?' he said.

Nathaniel nodded.

'Heaven and hell? Or something else?' said Ashley.

'I've never liked hell,' Sally said. 'Never have, never will.'

'What about the bad people?' Walter asked.

'What about them? Who gives a fuck?' said Nathaniel.

'Bad people will enjoy heaven just like the rest of us?' Walter said. 'That's not fair.'

'What are you? Five years old?' Nathaniel asked.

'What we have to ask,' said Sally, 'is are we creating a religion to give us hope in life after death, or is it also some moral enforcement system?'

'The Jews don't have much of an afterlife,' said Damian. 'I mean not like the Christians. Water poured onto the ground. That what Jews say.'

'Do we have to have an afterlife?' Ashley asked.

'I'd like one,' said Nathaniel. 'I think.'

'Or maybe reincarnation?' Ashley said. 'But without too much judging. I'm not keen on judging at all.'

Nathaniel scribbled in one of his exercise books. He wrote:

1. God or Gods?
2. The afterlife: Heaven, Hell, reincarnation or none of the above?
3. Prayer?
4. Creation?
5. Morality?

'You know,' he said. 'This is proving much more complicated than I had originally anticipated.'

'We need a vision,' said Sally. 'A really big fucking vision.'